Miami Art Museum

MAM

AMERICAN TABLEAUX

MANY VOICES, MANY STORIES

Selections from the Collection of Walker Art Center

June 20 – September 7, 2003

FOR CENTURIES THE ART OF STORYTELLING HAS BROUGHT PEOPLE TOGETHER and allowed them to share each other's experiences both real and imagined. Good stories encompass virtually every facet of human endeavor and come in many forms: books, films, songs, epic poetry, plays, or operas. There is also a strong narrative tradition in the visual arts, particularly in the United States.

American Tableaux: Many Voices, Many Stories celebrates the rich variety of tales told by individuals, communities, and cultures through more than eighty works of art that span the twentieth century. Drawn from the permanent collection of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the exhibition includes works by more than sixty artists who present a wide range of attitudes, viewpoints, and experiences about life in the United States.

The exhibition includes key early acquisitions that reflect the Walker Art Center's dedication to collecting regional and contemporary art since its founding in 1939. On view are one of the earliest acquisitions, Edward Hopper's 1940 *Office at Night* acquired in 1948, and the important sculptural work, *The Diner* by George Segal, acquired a few years after its completion in 1966. The Walker's collection originally focused on works by North American and European artists. Today it is international in scope and consists of more than 8,000 works. Recent Walker acquisitions on view in the exhibition include Sherrie Levine's *La Fortune* of 1990 acquired in 1993 and Doug Aitken's *rise* of 1998, which entered the collection in 1999.

American Tableaux: Many Voices, Many Stories is organized into six thematic areas that include works of various media by U.S.-based artists of multiple generations. Throughout the exhibition one can trace eras in our country's history through works that reflect upon the political and social issues and events that have shaped our nation. The exhibition begins with a section devoted to the urban and rural landscape. The exuberance of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the U.S. is captured in William Glackens' *Fourth of July* in turn-of-the-century New York and John Marin's bustling downtown scene. In his *American Landscape*, Joseph Stella portrays the Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883, as a powerful symbol of urban modernity. The sharp oblique angles of the bridges, skyscrapers, trains, and automobiles of the machine age also serve as inspiration for the Precisionist-style scenes by George Ault and Charles Sheeler. Doug Aitken's aerial view of Los Angeles at night presents a view of a modern-day metropolis. The landscape beyond the city inspired both Charles Burchfield's *Blackbirds in the Snow* of 1941-45 and Georgia O'Keeffe's *Lake George Barns* of 1926, created in upstate New York where she and her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, often visited. Also included in this section are Thomas Demand's large photograph of a paper-model version of the interior of Jackson Pollock's barn studio as well as sculptor Joel Shapiro's *Untitled* of 1975, depicting a minimal approach to the landscape.

The second section looks at domestic imagery and the physical and metaphorical homes we construct. Chris Faust's photographs document the disappearance of farmland in middle-America to make way for mass-produced housing, freeways, and strip malls. Dan Graham's intricate model for a suburban house featuring a Plexiglas exterior and mirrored interior ironically comments on the romantic ideal of suburban life and social conformity. Paul Shambroom's photograph of a combat alert facility at Ellsworth Airforce Base presents a haunting image of sleeping quarters in a dormitory for bomber crews. Works by Pepón Osorio and Carrie Mae Weems present psychologically powerful images dealing with the nature of relationships and the worlds that exist behind closed doors. Lee Friedlander's *Galax, Virginia* is one of a series of photographs by the artist focusing on how the majority of Americans allow television to dominate their lives and the spaces in which they live.

A third area of the exhibition explores roadside and street-level realities that can be found in "Anyplace, USA," as a result of the automobile and the freeway. Bright yellow road signs painted on the wall make up part of Alexis Smith's installation, *Golden State.* With slogans designed to entice travelers off the freeway, the cheery signs surround a multi-paneled collage resembling a long asphalt highway. Each panel includes bits of flattened roadside detritus and an attached text charting the endless miles of highway crossed by Raymond Chandler's fictional detective Philip Marlowe on his way to the San Fernando Valley. Ed Ruscha's accordion fold-out book, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, mimics the flat ribbon of highway found in Los Angeles. As in his other books of serial photographs taken along American highways, Ruscha's images encourage us to focus on the details in what seems to be a never-ending, never-changing landscape. Resembling large roadside street signs, Robert Indiana's green and red EAT and DIE paintings hang next to George Segal's psychologically charged life-size sculptural tableau of plaster cast figures sitting in an ordinary road-side diner. Both the waitress behind the counter and the solitary patron who gazes over her shoulder from his perch on the bar stool seem oblivious to anything beyond their insular world.

Beyond the diner and the "road," begins a section that invites reflection on the political and social issues that touch and shape our daily lives. Included are Kerry James Marshall's series of prints depicting slogans from the Civil Rights movement such as "We Shall Overcome," associated with the non-violent strategies of Martin Luther King, Jr., and "Black Power," the

title of Stokely Carmichael's black nationalist manifesto. Andy Warhol's *Flash – November 22, 1963* is a series of screenprints based on the barrage of images that flooded television and newspapers in the four days following John F. Kennedy's assassination. In these works, both artists reflect on how repetition and the passage of time can alter or diminish the original power of an image or spoken word. Repetition and meaning is also the focus of Robert Rauschenberg's *Currents*, a selection of eight screenprints of images drawn from newspapers. Likewise, Fiona Banner's exhaustively detailed book and audio tapes describing six popular Vietnam War movies comment on the ways Hollywood has interpreted and fictionalized the same historical event over and over again.

Glenn Ligon's installation of eight punching bags considers how conceptions of masculinity, identity, and race are perpetuated in sports and popular culture. Felix Gonzalez-Torres also investigates how we define masculinity in our culture in his photograph of one of thirteen words engraved on Roosevelt's tomb. Margia Kramer addresses feminism and civil rights in her work chronicling the government's surveillance of the actress Jean Seberg, known for her support of the Black Panther Party.

Personal narratives involving the body, gender, and the passages associated with self-discovery are the subject of the works in the fifth section. One group looks at the various ways in which the female nude has been depicted in American narrative art since the turn of the century. Louis Eilshemius' small *Hymn to Nature* of 1919 celebrates the figure and reverie in the natural landscape. Yasuo Kuniyoshi's *Lay Figure* of 1938 and Tom Wesselmann's *Great American Nude #32* of 1962 depict abstracted images of reclining nudes. In *My Father's Nudes* of 1989, Dorit Cypis investigates public and private encounters with female nudity and the shaping of her own identity through her father's collection of snapshots of 18th- and 19th-century nudes at the Louvre Museum in Paris. Robert Colescott's painting *Exotique* of 1994 is an ironic look at stereotypical representations of the female body and racial identity in art history.

Collier Schorr's *The Well #1 (White)* and Catherine Opie's 1998 photographs of lesbian couples speak from a woman's point of view about lesbian identity and desire. Works by Ron Vawter, Elizabeth Peyton and Lyle Ashton Harris explore various expressions of sexuality and gender. Issues of self-worth are explored in Bruce Conner's *The Bride* – a dark homage to unrequited love inspired by Dickens' character of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* – an aged spinster who, though jilted on her wedding night, wears her bridal gown up to the hour of her death.

The sixth section in the exhibition suggests a mock "clubhouse"– a private gathering space that combines images of desire and success with dashed dreams and disappointment. Sherrie Levine's *La Fortune* of 1990, a full-size pool table, dominates the center of the room. The work is a sculptural replication of the billiard table found in Man Ray's 1938 painting, *La Fortune* (Luck), inspired by the Surrealist's preoccupation with play and pleasure. Jack Pierson's tawdry reconstruction of a strip-club stage sits in the corner of the room as the site of compromise and broken dreams. Lutz Bacher's Vargas style pin-up recalls the American image of femininity that became popular with soldiers during World War II as a symbol of the home front and the values the soldiers were defending. After the war it became the portrait style of choice in poolhalls and gas stations across the country. Today, endless versions of the scantily clad pin-up and the messages embodied and perpetuated by it dominate mass media and consumer culture. The "clubhouse" also includes a selection of nine *Girlfriends* from Richard Prince's *Cowboys and Girlfriends* of 1992 – a series of images photographed from magazines depicting classic American icons of masculinity and masculine desire – the Marlborough man and biker babes.

Larry Johnson's narrative text inspired by advertising, paints a picture of a man whose looks and Jaguar XJE will, supposedly, take him anywhere he wants to go. Michael Smith and Joshua White chronicle the tragicomic story of success and failure through the story of a fictitious lighting business sliding steadily into decline. Graffiti artist Barry McGee's wall-sized mural includes a sea of downtrodden, depressed, and contorted cartoon-style faces representing the city's various denizens and the seamy side of life.

Together, the works in *American Tableaux: Many Voices, Many Stories* are a highly diverse group that invite us to examine how the term "American" and the idea of a single, coherent American society has changed over time.

There are two works at the beginning of the exhibition that offer possible definitions of "America" and their juxtaposition creates a provocative dialogue. Alfredo Jaar's photographic series, *A Logo for America* of 1987/1995, from Miami Art Museum's permanent collection is installed across from the Walker Art Center's Jasper Johns lithograph, *Two Maps II* of 1966. Both artists explore the symbolic representation embedded in maps. In her label text responding to Johns' work, Joan Rothfuss, Walker Visual Arts Curator and curator of the exhibition, considers the artist's chosen subject: "It can't be interpreted, or embellished, or changed, because that would make it wrong, and a map that's wrong is not only useless, it's a dangerous distortion of something real – history or politics or the relationship between land and water." Alfredo Jaar's series of photographs documenting a temporary public art installation in Times Square addresses this issue of distortion and contemporary thinking on the imprecision of language and perception; how maps, flags, and words – as communicative systems – relate to one's identity. In Miami, commonly referred to as the gateway to the Americas, this subject has great resonance.

To broaden this discussion even further, MAM invites visitors to participate in *Miami Stories* – an evolving installation in the *American Tableaux* Visitors Gallery devoted to reflecting the personal stories of those living in our community.

Lorie Mertes
Curator

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COVER: (left) Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled* 1990 (detail). Collection Walker Art Center, Rollwagen/Cray Research Photography Fund, 1991; (center) Edward Hopper, *Office at Night* 1940. Collection Walker Art Center, gift of the T.B. Walker Foundation, Gilbert M. Walker Fund, 1948; (right) George Segal, *The Diner* 1964-1966. Collection Walker Art Center, gift of the T.B. Walker Foundation, 1966.